

# CalFed plan on agenda for discussion in Redding

By RICHARD GOLB

At 6 p.m. Thursday at the Redding Doubletree Hotel, representatives of the CalFed Bay-Delta program, a partnership of state and federal agencies, will present a draft plan that is designed to address environmental and related water supply problems in the Bay-Delta ecosystem.

This plan, and how CalFed chooses to resolve these problems, will affect all water suppliers and farmers for years to come. I encourage you to attend to learn more about this program and offer your perspective on what it may mean for your community.

The Bay-Delta is a tremendous economic and environmental asset to California and the nation.

Twenty-two million Californians rely on the Bay-Delta system for drinking water supplies, millions of acres of productive farmland are irrigated with water from the Bay-Delta, and much of California's business economy utilizes these water supplies.

The Bay-Delta is the largest estuary on the west coast of North America and supports more than 750 fish and wildlife species, including 80 percent of all commercial fish species, several of which are now listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Water supply and environmental problems in the Bay-Delta have plagued state and federal agencies and water interests for decades. In 1994, a handful of state and federal agencies signed an agreement pledging cooperation on development of a long-term solution through a collaborative effort now known as CalFed.

This program is moving forward quickly. CalFed has released a draft plan with three alternatives to solve the Bay-Delta problems.

All three alternatives share similar features to restore fish and wildlife habitat, improve water management and develop new storage reservoirs.

The plan identifies one of these alternatives, Alternative 3, which recommends construction of a 10,000 cfs isolated transfer facility around the Delta, as the one with the most potential to solve these problems.

Northern California interests must understand the CalFed plan so we can try to shape its outcome, as this program offers both potential benefits and risks to this region.

The possible benefits may include construction of new surface storage reservoirs in Northern California to meet our region's increasing water supply needs, as well as funding for salmon recovery and enhancement projects such as fish screens for agricultural diversions. If the program is successful and improves the salmon fishery, it may alleviate regulatory pressures on all water users, including Sacramento Valley farmers.

But there are also risks. Northern Californians have historically viewed an isolated facility with suspicion because of its potential to damage the fishery and jeopardize this region's water rights and water supplies.

The 1982 vote on the Peripheral Canal, which northern California counties overwhelmingly

opposed, stands as a solemn reminder of this region's suspicion. The CalFed plan presents additional risks through its environmental restoration objectives.

For example, some of the restoration actions call for the acquisition of up to 30,000 acres of farmland for habitat, as well as the establishment of a meander corridor along the Sacramento River and its tributaries. CalFed is also considering an ambitious conjunctive use program, and may have to levy new taxes or water fees in order to finance aspects of the overall program. But these concerns are not reasons to walk away from the process, at least not yet.

CalFed's work on the draft plan is far from over. Full discussions on the issues important to this region are now underway. CalFed is also considering an extension of the present June 1 deadline for public comment on its draft plan in recognition of the complexity of the 3,500-page document.

Northern California Water Association has urged Clinton and Wilson administration officials to extend the deadline. The CalFed process, despite its shortcomings, offers the real possibility that California may finally resolve the Bay-Delta's environmental and water supply problems — and in turn Northern California's as well.

NCWA has advocated that CalFed's plan must address the following specific concerns, as well as provide a comprehensive solution for the needs of Northern California.

Three of our recommendations include: (1) the reaffirmation of

California's system of water rights law, including the area of origin commitments, to ensure this region's water supplies for future growth and development; (2) the development of new surface storage projects in Northern California, such as the proposed Sites Reservoir, that could provide environmentally sensitive off-stream storage; and (3) the implementation of a fully-financed plan to assist this region's water suppliers and farmers to voluntarily screen their diversions, improve flood control, and undertake other environmental restoration actions.

The real question is whether CalFed will adequately address this region's needs. I believe the answer depends upon our actions. Those who walk away from, or are cynical about, the process will only become politically isolated with no opportunity to protect their resources or improve their situation.

To truly protect this region, we must be involved. While not ideal, CalFed offers hope of coordination of state and federal actions and ultimately a resolution to the Bay-Delta problems.

Our choice is to either participate in the development of a solution that truly benefits Northern California, or stand by and leave these decisions to others who are less familiar with this region and its needs. I think the choice is clear — the way our needs will be met is by remaining committed and involved, and in the process, we just may help solve the problems

in the Bay-Delta and ours as well.

Richard Golb is executive director of the Northern California Water Association.

## OPINION